

How to talk to your kids about gender identity

with **Dr. Mark Yarhouse**

Recorded Nov. 8, 2023 | Released Nov. 27, 2023

TRANSCRIPT



NOTE: This transcript was AI-generated and has not been fully edited.

[00:00:00] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Greetings and welcome back to the Denison Forum Podcast. I'm Dr. Mark Turman, executive director of Denison Forum. We're glad to have you for this conversation. What we're trying to do is to encourage and to equip, to inspire and to motivate you to be salt and light for the glory of God in every environment of influence that God gives to you.

And we want to thank you for joining us for this conversation. Our desire is to prepare you and encourage you to be a hopeful, a joyful and bold missionary for Christ in our culture today around a lot of topics.

Today we're dealing with an area of sexuality called transgenderism, something that you've likely encountered or seen a lot of headlines about in our culture. And our guest today is Dr. Mark

Yarhouse, who is a professor of psychology at Wheaton College where he also directs the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute. Dr. Yarhouse is an award winning teacher, psychologist, and researcher. He's authored numerous books and articles, including the featured white paper on Sexual Identity for the Gospel Coalition's Christ and Campus Initiative.

He is very, very sought after and it is a real thrill for me to introduce him to you. If you don't know his work I've been following him for the last several years and have been greatly encouraged and helped by the work that he's done. And so he's joining us today as we talk about his most recent work, which is a tool for parents and grandparents called Talking to Kids About Gender Identity: A Roadmap for Christian Compassion, Civility, and Conviction. I think you'll be very much encouraged by this conversation, and we are glad to have you with us.

Dr. Mark Yarhouse, welcome to the podcast. We are glad to have you with us today.

[00:02:07] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Oh, thank you so much. It's really my pleasure.

[00:02:10] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Well, looking forward to talking about this new resource that's coming out from you called Talking to Kids about Gender Identity: A Roadmap for Christian Compassion, Civility, and Conviction. Look forward to getting into some of the details of that, but for those who may not be as familiar as I am with you and with your work, share a little bit about your background, how you got to Wheaton and into this particular area of work and study.

[00:02:39] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. So I'm a professor of psychology at Wheaton College. I teach in their doctoral program in clinical psychology and I direct the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute where we conduct research in the areas of kind of how people navigate faith and their Christian identity as a follower of Christ and questions around their sexuality or their gender. I've been at Wheaton for about four years. Prior to that, I was in Virginia for about 21 years teaching there.

So how I got into it is interesting. I mean, this goes back to when I was in graduate school. I came to Wheaton College. Actually, I was studying there and the Chair of the Department of Psychology asked me to be his research assistant, and this was such an honor I just said yes without knowing you know what we were going to be working on and he had a couple of lines of research. But I remember our first meeting one of them was around sexual orientation and his calling has been more apologetics like how do we defend the faith in a broader society, so we were looking at scientific research in mainline church task forces on sexuality and gender, how they were utilizing research, citing it.

And then was that, did they get it right? And then what was the logical relationship between those findings and a lot of the ethical conclusions they were drawing for the church. So I worked

with him for about four or five years. He became the senior academic officer at Wheaton. And so his administrative duties just went through the roof and he couldn't.

speak and write and lecture on this unless his research assistant did it. So I did a lot of things as I was growing as a student. And then you know, when I graduated, I didn't see any Christians in psychology working in this space and the Christians outside of psychology didn't seem to be familiar with the research I'd been working on for this four or five years.

So to me it was almost a matter of stewardship. You know, I prayed about it, but I feel like there was a lot of this, mentoring and investment in me. And you know, I had other things I was interested in, but these doors just kept opening and I just prayed about it and tried to be responsive to the circumstances. Families that were coming to my door, the opportunities for research and scholarship. So it's kind of an interesting pathway maybe to a topic.

[00:04:53] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. And kind of a lesson for all of us. I have a little bit of similarity of when your mentor or hero invites you into something, you just automatically tend to say yes without maybe asking all the questions that you might want to ask later on. So I've had some of that same experience over the last couple of years, but it's all been good.

Well, we want to talk about this very interesting and challenging category of gender identity and particularly what typically just falls under the broad term of transgenderism. It seems like I've had a chance to use some of your work in recent days, talking to pastors and have had some experience with this both as a pastor and within a larger family context.

It just seems like the whole concept of gender identity just landed on us in the last couple of years and has become a major topic of conversation within churches, within communities, within families has it just exploded in terms of its presence and maybe even along with that, can you define what you would say might be the two or three key terms that we really need to have clarity on kind of working our way through this conversation today?

[00:06:08] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. Well, it's definitely exploded in terms of, I would say the cultural salience of the topic. I don't know, we can talk about numbers and is it more frequent and things like that, but it has become part of the kind of centered in the cultural discourse around norms around sexuality and gender.

And I would say in the last, yeah, in the last 10, 15 years, in fact, I had written a book. The first book I ever wrote on gender was, The idea came in about 2010. I was doing a lot of training in youth ministry, equipping youth ministers and their church, and how to work with particularly people navigating sexual identity, which is same sex sexuality, gay, lesbian, bisexual experiences.

And about 2010, 2011, I would do an hour and a half, maybe a three hour pre conference workshop, but all of the Q& A started to shift towards gender identity and transgender experiences, and I realized, wow, this is a wave that is going to crest on the evangelical church, and we are not prepared for this conversation.

So that led me to those initial efforts to just introduce the evangelical community to the topic. And this most recent book is really equipping parents so that they see themselves as able to really lean into the conversation, not be as afraid to engage it. So is it more common and what are some good terms?

We are definitely seeing higher rates of people identifying as transgender, and there's a lot of theories as to why that might be. So you do see that even in like, Gallup polls, you're seeing, especially among Gen Z and millennials, you're seeing higher percentages. Key terms. Okay. So transgender is an umbrella term that was by that community said, we would like to be known this way, both politically and publicly prior designations to them were more psychiatric and more pathologizing. And so transgender was the word that they wanted to be known by. And it's an umbrella term for many experiences of gender identity where your gender identity doesn't correspond with biological markers like chromosomes, genitalia, things like that.

And so for the vast majority of people, those do align. But for a percentage of people, there's an incongruence there. And when that incongruence is there on the broad umbrella, we call it transgender. Sometimes people add non binary. So someone would say my identity is outside the binary of man and woman, or it's in between.

Whereas a cross gender identity is classically the man who says I'm a woman trapped in the body of a man, so it's a cross gender identity. So those are a couple terms. Sometimes I use dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is the distress that can be associated with that lack of... congruence that would be another pretty, and just, you know, if you want to know, just, I said, biological sex, gender is the the psychological, social, cultural aspects of being male and female. So we think of man and woman, boy and girl, and then you enter into this conversation of transgender and non binary.

[00:09:09] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So is it proper to, at this point, even attach like a percentage? I can imagine parents or grandparents listening this conversation going, you know, okay. Is this something I need to be worrying about and praying about when it comes to my child, to my grandchild? Is this a new phenomenon that is sweeping the younger generation? Is there even a percentage that we should utilize in thinking about how prevalent this is?

[00:09:37] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. A lot of people will say Not okay. So not gender dysphoria, the distress, but the broader umbrella of transgender, maybe about 1 percent of the

population. But if you break it down by generations, like Gen Z would be almost twice that almost like 2%. Millennials would be a little bit under that.

And then as you get older, like you mentioned, like a grandparent, well, their generation would have been well under 1%. So you have these, you know, different percentages. So it's definitely more common than most parents and grandparents would think, but it's maybe not as common as the attention given to it in entertainment and media would suggest. So maybe about 1 percent or so would identify as transgender.

[00:10:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And that's helpful to understand that media, especially broadly, might have a different agenda in terms of creating an idea or of normalizing something that is really relatively small within our population. And like you said, maybe because of just the way generations change and technology and other things that younger generations may now be feeling like they can talk about this or express some of these ideas at an earlier time in their life or at a broader level or lots, there's lots of complexity in that that, that needs to be further studied and understood.

One of the things I really appreciated about this resource at the beginning in the introduction and in even the subtitle was this idea of being a cultural ambassador. That's something at Denison Forum, we talk about a lot that we want to equip people to be cultural missionaries and what I sometimes call spiritual warriors, people who definitely are very aggressive in their prayer life about all kinds of things. That's what I mean by spiritual warrior.

But when it comes to relating to other people, to being a part, of both family, churches, communities, and conversations in whatever category, online or otherwise, these ideas that you express as a cultural ambassador or missionary of compassion, civility, and conviction. Unpack those three a little bit. And I just resonated so deeply with that from a perspective of Christian humility and why walking into these conversations, particularly those qualities are so critical.

[00:11:58] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah, yeah, I really wanted, and ambassadorship, of course, is not unique to anything in this book. I just was, you know, it's a very common Christian understanding, and I was contrasting that with culture warrior, which is different than what your concept that you've identified as spiritual warfare. That's, of course, really important to understand as a Christian, but sometimes we only have models in front of us of people who see everything in these areas as a threat to them, and so you end up pulling out some of the worst qualities in us as Christians to sort of be in this embattled position against people. And sometimes the casualties are the actual children and teens navigating and their families navigating these complex issues. So we want to, I think, move away from that posture in relating to our neighbor, to our children, to our children and their peers in their school, middle school and things like that.

On the other side, you have Christians who I called cultural capitulators, and they seem to not let their Christian worldview engage these topics at all. So someone says there's 50 genders. They say, okay, there's 50 they just take everything in stride. They never really question these things from a Christian worldview. So we want to avoid both of those extremes.

This middle point, which is hard to stay on is ambassadorship. And I do characterize it by convictions. What are your biblical convictions as a parent? What are those convictions around sexuality and gender? Can you relate to the topic and to the people who represent this topic with civility, because your children are watching.

They want to get a sense for how to engage the world around them. And I think being respectful gets you a better hearing than always being sort of adversarial. And then if this is not your experience. If your gender identity corresponds with those biological markers, and this has not been your experience, could you have some compassion for people for whom this is a live issue for their family?

They're really facing some tough decisions that you haven't had to face. Could we have a little empathy for them because it's not in our wheelhouse? So this kind of a convicted civility seasoned with compassion is the kind of hallmarks of ambassadorship.

[00:14:04] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And so, so well said building as you write in your book about on the work of Richard Niebuhr in some of this area, Christ and Culture. This was really, really some clarifying understanding and ideas around that. Tell me if I'm thinking on the line. I loved what you said about compassion is just this idea it reminds me that I'm dealing with real people in real situations, oftentimes in real distress.

I can remember as a pastor dealing with different kinds of confused and what we would typically call unbiblical expressions of sexuality. But always thinking that when it came to transgenderism, well that will probably never cross my desk as a pastor.

And, wasn't long after that, that it did, in the form of some families within the church that I was pastoring, and then, like I said, in my larger, extended family as well. I thought, well, maybe it's just time that all of us are going to have some experience with this in some way. I was wondering if in terms of civility, we've dealt with that topic and continue to try to hold up that topic in a lot of categories at Denison Forum.

My short pathway to that. Tell me if I'm on the same track with you, which is to say that we're being civil in our Christian faith is to say that we never believe that the fruit of the Spirit should go on vacation. It's always in season when we're talking to people and when we're dealing with any topic.

Is that a fair way of summarizing what you're getting at?

[00:15:32] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah, I love that. I love that. Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, people are made in the image of God. People have inherent dignity. They can be wrong about things and I'm probably wrong about some things as well, but to engage those ideas is not to denigrate the person and you want to be civil. I think you just get a better hearing.

You get more time with people. There's more respect for how you carry yourself. And as a parent, you know, your kids are always, you can tell them to be respectful, but they're watching you. How are you engaging these topics? And how are you engaging your neighbor and extended family and your coworkers?

I mean, these are the things that kids pick up on pretty quickly.

[00:16:07] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And a couple of additional points you make about you know, ambassadors just being curious about others and wanting to understand their experience, you know, how did the person they're talking to arrive at where they are and their particular understanding. And then the desire for building and maintaining relationships across time that if, you know, that's so important.

[00:16:31] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah, I one time had a pastor call me and he had just hung up on the phone with a transgender person who was in their fifties and the pastor. Yeah, the person wants to visit the church, my church, and he was hoping we could meet for coffee just to kind of see what that might be like if he came to church on Sunday.

And so I hung up with him and I called you because I got to tell you, they didn't cover this in seminary and you know, that's probably right. They didn't. And I said, well, definitely call the person back and meet them for coffee. Take them up on that offer. But when you sit down why don't you say this?

Why don't you say, I feel like I'm meeting you at about chapter 7 of your life and I haven't had a chance to hear about chapters 1 through 6, but I'd like to. And I think that that person would never have had a pastor make that invitation. And I don't know how, I mean, I'm an elder in my own church, I don't know how you would shepherd somebody at chapter seven if you didn't understand what preceded this.

By listening, you're not agreeing with every decision a person made but you'd want to have some sense of how they got to where they are, and that they're in front of you now, and even curious about your church and about faith. I mean, there is so much there that is a possible direction to

go, but you really don't know how to minister to someone chapter seven without hearing about one through six.

[00:17:51] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. What a great way of thinking about that in terms of pastoral care. As somebody who's worked and studied and talked with so many people and writes on this what could we say with any kind of clarity at this point, relative to causes?

You know, we've always had some sense of this relative to gender. Anytime we just simply use the word tomboy, we're referencing something in this category. But is there really anything at this point that we can say with confidence about causes?

[00:18:25] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. I think the short answer is that we don't know. We're going to have to be a bit We're gonna have to hold that for a while. That doesn't mean that there aren't strong opinions. There's an interesting developments in these areas. And in our society, we often get polarized around, you know, nature versus nurture.

And so, like in my field, a lot of people are drawn to the idea that there's something in our biology that makes people have these experiences. That's going to be the nature side of it. And there's not really great evidence to support that at this point. I wouldn't be surprised if there was. I mean, sometimes people talk about what you might call like an intersex condition of the brain.

So intersex conditions are conditions where there's shared reproductive tissue of male and female. And there's a lot of different medical conditions related to that, but it can make it difficult sometimes to identify a child as clearly male or female, even at birth. And so, that, that is a, those are pretty well documented experiences.

And so some people have kind of speculated, are we looking here at something like an intersex condition of the brain? So I'm not against that idea, but you always have to separate out theory from research to support theory. And it's a really intuitively appealing theory, but the research just isn't caught up with it quite yet. I'm not against it, but I just can't promote it as though it's true. I, so I think I'm holding that loosely.

On the other side, the nurture side, most of those studies are more what we call correlational. There's a association there, but it's not an explanation of a cause.

And so, yeah, I mean there's correlations of things like, you know, abuse growing up and elevated rates of people saying that was part of their background neglect disruptive things growing up in their home. But again, I wouldn't say that's what caused this person's experience. I just wouldn't know.

And those studies weren't designed to answer that question. So that's the longer answer. The shorter answer is we really don't know. And it's really hard in ministry or as a parent to live with something you just don't know the answer to.

Now I will say many parents will fill in that gap with answers for themselves, though many parents blame themselves. If their child struggles with gender dysphoria or later identifies as transgender, many Christian parents will say it's something that we did. We shouldn't have moved so much. You shouldn't have taken that promotion, we shouldn't have, you know, and they start to scrutinize every decision that they've made and I really haven't seen evidence that it's something that a parent does or fails to do.

So, yes, I'm saying we don't know, but I'm also saying there's not evidence that it's something that you're failing at as a parent. And I think that's important for parents to realize.

[00:21:05] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. So, so much the case you know, we're just so uncomfortable as people seemingly with the term, I don't know. We just get really frustrated with that answer, but it can help you in a lot of ways especially in conversations and relationships. Especially when somebody wants to run to the idea of I was born this way or nobody was born this way and getting more comfortable with the idea of, well, we just don't know. And we may never know, but we can certainly say at this point, we really don't know in terms of clear causes that we can confidently express.

This book is obviously written and pointed at parents and trying to help them have some real tools and some real skills. I love how you come back every single chapter back to those three fundamentals of conviction and civility, compassion, but you also include some sample conversations, even helping people to have some scripts to you know, Hey, You might want to say some things this way and love how practical that is because a lot of times if you don't give people examples in real language, they just don't know what words would be better words, what would be helpful in that.

But a lot of what you're putting in here has to do with what we might be calling faith based, faith driven Parenting as opposed to fear based and fear driven parenting. Talk about that. Talk about how even, you know, a parent might know which category they're actually operating in. It's it, I just know as a parent and now as a grandparent watching my daughter parent, two small children that's a challenge. It's a daily almost moment by moment challenge to not allow yourself to be driven so much by your fears, but rather by your faith.

[00:22:56] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. Yeah. Sometimes when we have children who might express themselves in ways that are kind of atypical for their gender. Sometimes we parents get more anxious about that. What does that mean for my child? What is that something wrong? In

most cases, it's there's nothing. It's just within the normal scope of what it means to be a boy, what it means to be a girl.

But in some instances, it might indicate something else going on, like this dysphoria that I talked about. And yeah, the big part of the book and a big part of my own counseling and ministry would be to reduce fear based ways of parenting. And every parent I've met has said, I did not parent at my best when I parented out of fear and anxiety.

And sometimes it comes out sideways in less healthy ways. So, you know, if you see yourself being short with your child. You just don't have much in the reserves. You're feeling like you're, and that happens just because of, you know, demands of work and other ministry. And we just don't have a lot in the tank and we're shorter with our child.

And it's things like that could be a sign of it. Sometimes we try to manipulate the outcomes. Like, I was talking to parents where their son was somewhat atypical for a boy and they were a little bit nervous about that. What did that mean? And he mostly played with his sister and her friends who were girls.

Their neighborhood didn't have a lot of girls around them. Well, a family moved in and they had a boy about his age. So the parents asked about that. Now, a fear based parenting would make that happen. So I'm going to make sure my son is playing with that boy. Whatever it costs. And I'm going to try to manipulate that outcome because somehow that relationship would make all of this go away and reducing fear base would say, okay, well, I'll make an invitation so he knows that that boy is there. If that works out, that works out, but we're not going to manipulate that. If he says, I'm not really that interested, then we're not going to try to it. make that happen. You've got to become friends with this boy. That's your anxiety talking. It might be great if they were friends, but we don't know that that would, you know, really, there's nothing from our evidence that that would resolve anything in this space.

So that would be a good example of fear based versus, you know, faith based and just really creating opportunities, but not trying to dictate those terms to a child. Yeah,

[00:25:15] **Dr. Mark Turman:** And I think as you talk about that, it just makes me think about the idea that, you know, all parents have hopes and dreams for their children from their earliest days. but we may not be aware when our hopes and dreams turn into expectations. And then we start parenting out of those expectations and even the disappointment of those expectations when we don't think our child is staying on the track that we think would be good for them. Is that maybe a larger later kind of expression of fear?

[00:25:48] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** that's a really good way to, to think about that. You know, a lot of times Parents borrow from the future. And that's what anxiety often is, is what's that going to mean for, you know, dating? What's that going to mean for their sexuality? What's that going to mean for marriage? I mean, I mean, we're already talking children and grandchildren and they're like nine, you know?

And so, okay, we need to kind of pull back a little bit and let's, you know, Scripture says there's enough. There's enough today for us to occupy in terms of our bandwidth and our capacity. You don't have to borrow from 10 years from now, 15 years from now, but I know we all struggle with this. That's a pretty common parental response.

[00:26:25] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So, really appreciated so much of our audience and so many people that you work with come from a very strong conviction as believers. Followers of Christ, which is great. But you did a really helpful job I thought talking about how people approach this from their faith saying, okay, I need chapter and verse on this. Where does the Bible talk about this? Give us some insight into that as people of faith, people committed to the Bible as the word of God. How can the Bible help us? How could we possibly misuse the Bible in trying to work through a topic like this?

[00:27:00] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah, this was a tough one. I kind of talked about how there's two types of people. There's Christians who are chapter and verse people and there's Christians who are kind of broad principles from Scripture people. And I don't mean to be particularly critical. I love in prayer and in reading Scripture to pull on chapters and verses that are really helpful to me.

They've taken me through some really difficult seasons of my life, but sometimes when you get to a complex topic like gender identity, it's tempting to say, well, let me just pull that one verse and that one verse will kind of settle all the issues that are involved here. So, I mean, the one common verse would be Deuteronomy 22, five, and it talks about about not men, not dressing as women, women, not dressing at men.

And I, I totally appreciate the desire to sort of pull a chapter and verse into this conversation, but you also have to do the work of figuring out how that was understood at the time. What are the applications today? And yeah, there's different scholarship on that. I'm not necessarily want to get into the weeds here together on that, but I mean, it was definitely a prohibition that may have been connected to practices by the ancient, by the Canaanites around the ancient Israelites.

And so there was clearly. You know, do not do that. And apparently there may have been involved in ritual practices that involve cross dressing and then sexual behavior associated with

that. So insofar as that's the case, that's not what's happening today. And people are struggling with this incongruence.

That's not it an act of willful disobedience. They find themselves with this incongruence. And now what do we do with that? How do we respond to that? So there's motivations that would be different. There's all these different pieces of it. That doesn't mean you commend cross dressing behavior. There's nothing to consider when it comes to those experiences. But I don't think we want to necessarily go chapter and verse to that complexity.

What I would be a fan of is more broad biblical principles. And I tend to take the four acts of the biblical drama that others have written extensively about. But what do we learn from creation? What is God's intention in creation for norms around sexuality and gender, for distinctions between male and female from creation?

What do we learn from the fall, the effects of the fall in all of creation? We wouldn't be surprised if all of creation has fallen, that our gender has fallen, and there's manifestations of that, and this might be one of them, this kind of lack of congruence between gender identity and biological sex, but God doesn't leave us there.

He is at work redeeming us through Jesus Christ, and all of creation is moving towards something we call either consummation or glorification. So we can sort of envision a future where a lot of the things that we're dealing with are resolved and we have peace in that, but many of those are not resolved this side of eternity.

Some are besetting conditions. Many things that we struggle with in a fallen world that's being redeemed are besetting conditions. And so if you can't restore creational intent, if we can't have that experience, what does it mean to live with things that are enduring realities that are difficult for us?

And maybe gender dysphoria is like that for people. What would it mean to care for that person, to love that person, to disciple that person if they know Christ? You know, these are really important questions for an angle of entry into this conversation with your neighbor, with your child, with their friends, those types of things.

[00:30:21] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah, and really helpful to just frame it in that sense of as some theologians say, we are living in the time between times that time between the death and resurrection of Christ and his eventual coming in universal glory. I heard one person recently likened that to you know, in the days of World War II, there was D Day, which was considered to be the beginning of the end of the war, but you know, V E Day didn't come for quite a long time, for a good number of months, and What was it like to live in that in between time? And that

same kind of thing of the kingdom of God has come, but it is also still coming and that we're living in some messy times while we try to get there.

Also has helped me recently kind of think about just the doctrine of biblical depravity. That means that doesn't mean that we are incapable of doing good things. It means that every part of us, including our sexuality and our gender understanding our identity along many categories has been impacted as well.

I wanted to chase a rabbit with you for a moment just as I was thinking through this and reading through your work help us understand because a lot of times we just, we make big, big buckets at times. And what I hear in conversations that I have is that people start talking about transgenderism, they end up also talking about homosexuality, or if they're talking about somebody who has come out as gay they very soon quickly get to talking about people who are transgender. It's almost like, there are some conversations that just throw all of these people into one big bucket as if it's all the same thing when that's just absolutely not the case for multiple reasons. taLk about that a little bit and how it's important to think about these things in their particular categories. Otherwise we're just going to end up with a really confused situation.

[00:32:22] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. I mean, when you think about the identity labels like LGBTQ, I, a, you start to move different letters, designate different experiences. There's an advantage to doing that because it creates a more expansive community that can sort of work towards shared goals. But the reality is that those experiences are very different.

I mean, having same sex sexuality as a gay person is very different than having an intersex condition that I just described a moment ago is very different than having a discordant gender identity. So you end up like these experiences are not identical. And there's of course variations even within those categories of people's experiences based on their faith and other elements of their life.

But yeah, I mean, when we talk about discordant gender identities, that is so different than who you're attracted to, than your sexual orientation, your sexual attraction, your sexual behavior, which gets us into more gay, lesbian, bisexual. And we have more Scripture that speaks into that. But this experience of discordance is really different.

And I think, you know, we today call it dysphoria. We previously called it an identity disorder. But this experience is kind of a fundamentally in a profoundly different experience now. It raises complex pastoral questions about later maybe sexual intimacy and things like that. But we don't have to settle all those on the front end.

I think we have to just kind of work with the person where they are and realize that they're often experiencing quite a bit of distress. And that distress can be mild. I know people who have very mild dysphoria, can be moderate and it can be severe. So we don't want to treat it as though it's all one thing.

It's all severe all the time. A lot of times parents feel kind of bullied into stepping into possible interventions because their child, because every child who has this has severe experiences of it. Well, that's not the case either. Some people have very mild cases and some cases ebb and flow and severity.

So I think we want to be you're pretty careful to address this issue and not other issues and then this issue with some understanding of the nuances that are involved here, it's pretty complicated actually.

[00:34:23] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. And it's just so important that we make distinctions and that we not blend all of these things together in ways that are just. Really inappropriate and unhelpful to the conversation. There'll be some people listening to us I would imagine who will say, well, you know, this has become so much on our radar because young people just like to push the envelope and there's technology now that social media realities.

And so much of this, some will say is just a matter of social contagion. The reason we see higher numbers with millennials and Gen Z is just simply because they want to be a part of the cool crowd that's using these terminologies. Talk to us a little bit about what you put in the book and what your thoughts are about just kind of staying away from the social contagion issue and how many people that you are working with they didn't want this. They didn't wake up one day and just decide that they wanted to pursue this course. It's usually the opposite, right?

[00:35:18] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. Yeah. I remember working with a teenager, 17 year old who came with her parents and they had been to some of their church leaders in the past. And I think two or three and each of them said it was willful disobedience on this person's part. And I did an all day evaluation and I reached a conclusion.

I told the mother that, you know, your daughter did not choose to experience this discordance that she has. I mean, her experience is not lining up with these biological markers and it's been pretty difficult for her. And when I said that she didn't choose it, she just broke into tears. The mother did because she had never known another way to think about her daughter other than being kind of disobedient.

And when you just sort of think of it kind of a tunnel vision. That's the category we're putting it in. They're just disobedient. Yeah, I don't know anybody who woke up one day and said, I'm going to experience my gender in this way.

Now people are raising good questions. How do we account for this increased percentage? Surely there's got to be some social cultural influence. And I'm not saying there isn't. I think that's definitely something that we need to study. Social contagion though, as a phrase comes out of the eating disorder literature actually. And in that literature, eating disorders, compared to like schizophrenia or other depression, things like that, are one of the most culturally bound conditions we have.

Meaning they're really tied to your society's views of body weight and shape and size and beauty and things like that. And that is communicated through media and images and things of that nature. And we know that adolescent females are more susceptible to those messages than adolescent males. And it can contribute to the development of an eating disorder.

It can contribute to the maintenance of an eating disorder. And so when we talk about social contagion, it's the passing along of those messages that can reinforce those

images that can contribute to eating disorders. That's pretty well documented phenomenon. So some people are kind of copying and pasting that literature over to gender and saying, that's what's going on here. So I'm not prepared to say that's what's going on here cause you have to do that work to figure out, is that what's going on? You have to do that research, but I'm not. against the idea that there can be peer group influence and social influence. I mean, obviously there's something else going on here than just the permission to speak what's going on in your life, like this self awareness that's increasing for people.

I mean, surely that's part of what's going on, but to say that that's all that's going on is probably naive. But the other extreme to say, well, And then it's probably just the choice the person's making. It's willful disobedience. I mean, that seems to be a very simplistic answer to a very complex issue.

So there's probably multiple contributing factors. They probably vary from person to person. There can be, I think, peer group influence. There can be young people who are searching for identity. This developmental stage of adolescence is a time of, Figuring out identity. So that's important. And so you could have some young people who land on this because it's a culturally salient experience.

And maybe a generation ago, they would have landed on some other culturally salient topic, but they land here. But to say that that's what's going on for everybody or the next person you meet

is put in the cart in front of the horse. We just, I wouldn't say that about the next person. You'd have to really talk with them for a while to figure out what's going on.

[00:38:37] **Dr. Mark Turman:** No. So yeah, helpful. Pull out a little bit and help us understand. We get into this conversation around transgender issues and that type of thing. We hear so many things usually several stories a week in broad media if you're paying that much attention but we hear about about clinics about you know, there's lots of attention about this, gender clinic in the UK that was doing all of these things and then shut down.

Help us understand the social transitioning experience that has to do with pronouns and names and then hormonal as well as surgical these three categories, help us understand what those categories are and what your guidance at this point for parents would be along those three lines.

[00:39:25] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. So I tend to think about these from least invasive to most invasive interventions. So, the least invasive things. Obviously, just, you know, coping skills, deep breathing, muscle relaxation, you know, just identifying unhelpful thoughts that are undermining your well being and replacing them with helpful, adaptive thoughts that are they're more, more true.

So I do things like that, but then you start to move into Hygiene and hairstyle and clothing that's also a completely reversible step that a lot of people do pursue when they struggle with dysphoria.

A little bit further than that would be the request for name and pronoun. And so, if you keep going down the road, you have the, so we call that a social transition, name and pronoun clothing, those types of things.

And then you move into, should we do medical steps? And that would be hormone treatment. So using cross sex hormones that would facilitate what's called like appearance congruence, where their body changes in ways that line up with what they're saying they experience. And then gender confirmation surgeries are a whole range of surgical interventions that people may pursue.

And of course, by naming these, I'm not commending these. Sometimes people think I'm commending them by naming them, but they exist as options for people today. And I think if you're a family member, a neighbor, a friend, a coworker, you want to at least know the kinds of things that they're facing.

These are real questions that they're facing or your friend, your neighbor is considering. So to at least be somewhat familiar with that I think would be good. They're going to be facing some tough decisions about the best way to lower that distress to mitigate the dysphoria, and the broader culture is largely going to try to move them along a certain path and that really needs to be looked at a kind of a case by case basis.

How do they feel about this? What are their values around this? So we talk about a lot of those different options, but mostly I'm trying to help parents have a better conversation with their son or daughter about how it's being talked about in school and what a Christian understanding is that at creation, God intends us to be male and female, and for the vast majority of people, being a boy or a girl maps on to being male or female.

Now, when there are variations that happen, you know, we can be respectful and understanding and empathic and compassionate towards that, but we want to be relationship to those people who are facing those tough questions.

So unfortunately this has kind of come down to a little bit of a polarized view of pronoun use and things like that. Some Christians say you shouldn't ever do that because you're not speaking truth about who this person is. Other people say you should always do that, because it's a matter of hospitality.

And I've probably been framed as part of the hospitality group. And I guess I would say this, I would say many times I do use the name and pronouns that people introduce themselves to me as a matter of respect for that person. But my use of it is not making an ontological claim about their maleness or their femaleness.

I'm not making that claim. And I'm also recognizing there's other truths. Yes, God does make people male and female. Yes. But God also placed them in relationship to me. God also loves them and wants a relationship with them. So it's not a simple speaking the truth versus being hospitable.

Sometimes you're hospitable to have a longterm extended relationship where a lot of truths are present. And now you have an opportunity to embody and bear witness to them, be in relationship to them. You extend your ministry opportunities. And God is at work. And so I kind of lay that out a little bit. Maybe thicken the plot to that oversimplification that it's just hospitality versus truth. I think that oversimplifies this discussion.

[00:43:19] **Dr. Mark Turman:** So I've had some conversations along this line relative to factoring in the age of the person who may be requesting a different name or a different pronoun. Does that really factor in in your you know, you would, or you wouldn't do that with say a child

under 10, whereas you might do something different with a teenager or somebody in their adult years.

[00:43:44] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah, part of what I'm doing as a mental health professional as I'm looking at how distressing the incongruence is for them and whether the name and pronoun seems to be helping them with this distress. It's a little clearer it's helpfulness or not being helpful in adolescence than it would be in childhood and childhood.

A lot of times families have nicknames for their kids, other ways that they reference them that that might also seem to help in some way. So there might be some other latitude there with a child. And I also think you want to give that some time. You want to have some patience around their gender to see what happens over time because in some research, a lot of the discordance that we report seems to resolve as a child gets older. That's a bit of a debate in our field right now. Let's say that 10 or 11, they're experiencing this. Well, what if they weren't having that same experience by 17 or 18? There's a number of studies that have shown that that appears to resolve for some of those kids.

So maybe doing something too early might foreclose prematurely on those, you know, on, on that experience of gender. That's something that you could consider. You could weigh that.

Of course, a child could also go one direction and then rethink that. I was just talking to a researcher where that's happened. Where sometimes kids asked for those things, even young, like you've described. And then they walk that back later. They decided that wasn't really the path. It's not very common. But I know that's harder for parents with younger kids. And I'm not saying that that's something you ought to do. I think that's a very case by case kind of a conversation to have.

[00:45:22] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. So let me see if I can take this down to an even more practical level and see if you have some wisdom for us, which is, I'm thinking of a parent of a 10 or 12 year old that is thinking of having a sleepover with some of the neighborhood kids. Or I'm thinking of that pastor, that children's minister, that youth minister is saying, okay, we have, we want to welcome this person who is experiencing some challenges in the area of gender dysphoria and transgenderism.

What is the practical wisdom about, You know, how you would handle this in your home with a group of neighbor children and one of them that you've welcomed in you wanted to be hospitable. You wanted to have a relationship with this child and with their family. What do you, you know, I've in my own town, just dealing with, well, what do you do about bathrooms? And those kinds of things. What's some of the wisdom that we might be able to apply there.

[00:46:18] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Well, I mean, thankfully with our homes, you know, your bathrooms aren't gendered. And so you can have people just one at a time use the bathroom and it ends up really not being an issue. I think when we get into more public policy and what do you do with bathrooms becomes a lot more complicated.

And it really depends on where that person is in their degree of transitioning. And if someone is completely transitioned them going to the bathroom of their biological markers would be problematic. Whereas on the front end of just figuring this out and maybe they're speculating as to whether they might transition, then that's a different question, right? So you have to really look at that. Not, you know, should they in all cases and all times use this or that, it just oversimplifies it.

I think in a home or in a church or a youth group, things like that, you know, a lot of churches say, we want to be missional. We want to be missional. We want to reach the community. And then, these things come up. But what about a lock in? What about an overnight? What about a camping trip? Okay, well, it's gonna be more complicated than so. And we do tend to break out a lot in our churches into boys and girls. And we do different things like that. I mean, many churches do. And that's not to say that that's wrong.

Obviously, we could still do that. But we might be a little bit more open to other ways to break out by interests and things like that from time to time, not always doing it by gender. And if you knew somebody was a guest or part of your community, and this was a struggle for them, there's probably a point where you would talk with that family about what that's like and some suggestions they might have, because we are trying to be hospitable.

We want you to be part of our youth ministry. And so we don't want to continue to do things that feel like they could be antagonistic towards you. They're not intended that way. They're tended to reflect our understanding of male and female, boy and girl. But we realize that's not been your experience.

We want you to know that we love you. God loves you. Once a relate, if they don't already have a relationship with God, that God wants that relationship with them. And we don't want to do things that are going to mean you're going to skip out. You're going to take off because you don't feel like you're loved here.

So I think those are some things to work out, maybe with that family, with that adolescent, those conversations I mean, you want to be wise in these conversations. You don't overhaul youth ministry just because one person has this experience. On the other hand, what do those exceptions teach us about how we've done ministry?

Are there any other ways that we would want to maybe fine tune some things so that the person isn't feeling like they're centered in this discussion and they're the cause for like conflict in the church. And we want to be careful about that.

[00:48:48] **Dr. Mark Turman:** No, it's a good word. We're almost out of our time today, but wanted to touch on maybe one or two other things. Mark, is there kind of a framework that you would give for parents when it comes to not just talking to their children about transgenderism, whether that relates to their own understanding of gender identity or that of others around them. Is there kind of a framework for talking to your children in age appropriate ways about all of human sexuality and gender identity? Do you have a framework that you recommend for parents?

[00:49:23] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah. I mean, I do recommend that you talk about sexuality and gender from a young age, that there is the talk about sexual intimacy and sexual responsibility as they get a bit older. But at a young age with children

, as you give them a bath, as you teach them about anatomy, I think just being able to help them understand what different aspects of their their sexuality and gender are to name proper names for what these experience, what the anatomy is, is important. And that these things are good things that God created us this way.

But also to be aware that in some cases, as you name those creational goods, in rare instances, a child might not respond well to that because they aren't experiencing it that way. So I don't want to Act like this is very common that most parents would experience that.

That's not the case. Most parents can expect that their child's gender maps onto their biological sex and they can name those things and expect those things to be good and from creation and good experiences.

Every now and then you might have an experience where a child's trying to communicate to you something different than that. And then you have to also be sensitive and empathic when that happens. You're not have to correct them. You can help understand what they're saying about their gender. Might be a good step.

So I do that a little bit with with young children, parenting young children. I think you continue that through older children into middle school into adolescence. There are some good resources on that. Stan and Brenna Jones have a nice book called Talking to Kids About Sex. My frequent co author Julia Sadusky has a new book out that's a very similar title for parents talking to their kids about sex. So you can look for those two resources. I think those are nice.

And Julia does a lot of dialogue just like I did in this book about explaining borrow my language, borrow my words. This is what I would try to say. And so I do that in this book as well. Just trying to give parents a little bit of script, especially if they're anxious about it, sometimes when we're anxious and we go off script, we could say some things we want to say differently down the road.

So just giving people some confidence going into these conversations and a lot of these conversations aren't, you know, intended conversations. They're teachable moments. There are moments that happen and you didn't plan for them.

So I remember one time my son, we were getting pizza and one of the drivers was coming out of the pizza place and was transgender. My son was maybe eight or nine and said, Dad, what? What's going on with that guy? And this was a male who was presenting as a woman, but didn't pass, you know, particularly well. My son was observing that. And I just talked with him about how most people's experience, yourself as a boy, me as a man, maps on to how God made us as male or female, in this case male.

And so I think we just met somebody that in rare instances that mapping on doesn't happen, that correspondence doesn't happen. I think we just saw someone where it doesn't. And I want you to imagine if that was someone that you knew, you know, how difficult that would be, you know, what do you do with that experience?

I wanted my son to realize there are norms, but there's also exceptions. And you can have compassion towards people when things don't line up the way that they are meant to from creation. That doesn't have to be an assault on my values as much as that has to be, gosh, I want to be understanding that that person is facing something I've never faced and I want to be able to intercede for them and pray for them and realize that God wants a relationship with them as well.

[00:52:46] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Yeah. One of the comments in your book that I thought was so helpful is to affirm the creation intent and norm is not to oppress the person who's the exception. saying that exactly right. But we, we seem to be in a culture where many people say that it is that, you know, if you're articulating the norm, then you're somehow being oppressive to those who are the exceptions. It's not the case.

[00:53:11] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** And the opposite's true. If you're compassionate towards someone who's struggling in this area, that doesn't mean you're calling into question biblical truths. Like, it goes both ways, right? I mean, so, I want parents to have conviction and civility. Conviction and compassion, right? You can do both.

[00:53:26] **Dr. Mark Turman:** yeah, so, so important, so helpful. And I would say, one of my thoughts in this area is that this is a huge opportunity for the church to minister, but also to declare the beautiful works and plans of God. The church just, at least in my experience, has not been teaching a robust biblical theology of sexuality and identity, identity on a broad category.

You know, I put 25 of my best members into a room that ranged from 30 to 60, asked them how many of them had been given any kind of sexual instruction from their biological parents. You know, there's only about three out of 25. And we just have to do better than that. We have to at age appropriate levels, as you said, starting from younger ages.

We have to resource parents and as a church be willing to bring God's beautiful intent out into the open where we can explain to people what he's doing,

what he wanted, and what he still wants, as well as minister to those whose experience is something different. Mark, where can people follow your work at Wheaton and in the Institute? How do they not just simply maybe access this book and other things that you've written, but how do they stay in touch with you and with the work that you're doing in this area.

[00:54:47] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** Yeah, so I'm at Wheaton College and I run the Sexual and Gender Identity Institute. So that's SGI. So if you go to Wheaton. edu backslash SGI, you'd find our Institute web page. That's also an email SGI at Wheaton. edu. And then I guess if you're on Twitter or X, you can follow me at at Mark Yarhouse Twitter. It's kind of like middle school all over again. I'm not sure I'd recommend it, but if you want to I'm out there as well.

[00:55:14] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Right. Well, we'll put all those things in the show notes as well. And people can follow you. Do we ever really get out of middle school and high school?

[00:55:22] **Dr. Mark Yarhouse:** no, I don't think we do.

[00:55:26] **Dr. Mark Turman:** Mark, thank you for the conversation and for the great work that you're doing. This will be a very useful resource. I'm already ordering my copy for my who is a parent herself. And thank you for that. And again, just thank you for the larger body of work that you've been about and that you continue to do. We thank you for that.

And just want to thank our audience for listening to us today. And as we often say, if this has been useful to you, please rate review us so that other people can find this podcast and pass this along, send it to others that you know, that might need some of this information might find it encouraging, helpful and useful and they will appreciate it as well. Until next time, thank you for being a part of The Denison Forum Podcast. God bless you.